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A. Jane Birch

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QUESTIONING THE COMMA IN VERSE 13 OF THE WORD OF WISDOM

A. Jane Birch

Abstract: The 1921 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants included an additional comma, which was inserted after the word “used” in D&C 89:13: “And it is pleasing unto me that they should not be used, only in times of winter, or of cold, or of famine.” Later authors have speculated that the addition of the comma was a mistake that fundamentally changed the meaning of the verse. This article examines this “errant comma theory” and demonstrates why this particular interpretation of D&C 89:13 is without merit.

In 1921, a committee of five apostles who had recently completed a new edition of the Book of Mormon began preparing a new edition of the Doctrine and Covenants (D&C). Elder James E. Talmage, a member of the committee, noted that previous editions of the D&C contained “many errors by way of omission.”¹ The most significant change in this new edition was the removal of the “Lectures on Faith,” but the committee also expanded the headnotes, revised the footnotes, and divided the pages into double columns.² Numerous smaller changes were also made. As one of the many changes published in the revised 1921 edition, a new comma appeared in verse 13 of section 89,

1 Richard E. Turley Jr. and William W. Slaughter, *How We Got the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 101.

2 Turley and Slaughter, *How We Got the Doctrine and Covenants*, 105.

also known as the Word of Wisdom. This comma was inserted between the words *used* and *only*:

Yea, flesh also of beasts and of the fowls of the air,
I, the Lord, have ordained for the use of man with
thanksgiving; nevertheless they are to be used sparingly;

And it is pleasing unto me that they should not be used,
only in times of winter, or of cold, or famine. (D&C
89:12–13)

In his detailed analysis of the textual changes throughout the history of the D&C, Robert J. Woodford relates the following interesting story:

It [the comma] was never found in any text prior to the 1921 edition of the D&C. According to T. Edgar Lyon [prominent LDS historian and educator], [Apostle] Joseph Fielding Smith, when shown this addition to the text, said: “Who put that in there?” This is a significant statement since Elder Smith served on the committee to publish that edition of the D&C. Thus, the comma may have been inserted by the printer and has been retained ever since.³

This story supports what has become a very popular interpretation of verse 13, namely, that the inserted comma is a mistake that *reverses* the meaning of the text and that the true meaning is understood only with the errant comma removed. This interpretation suggests that the Lord is instructing us that we should not confine ourselves to eating meat⁴ only in times of

3 Robert J. Woodford, “The Historical Development of the Doctrine and Covenants: Vol. II,” (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 1974), 1175–76.

4 Note that while I will often use the word *meat*, the text actually refers to “flesh also of beasts and of the fowls of the air.” The terms are not necessary equivalent.

winter, cold, and famine, implying that meat should be eaten at all other times as well.

Not only is this particular interpretation of verse 13 found on numerous websites, but I am aware of at least a few BYU professors who rely on this interpretation in explaining this verse to students. It is also included in a number of D&C commentaries written by LDS scholars. The following is an example from James W. McConkie's 2010 D&C commentary:

Sometimes the addition or deletion of a comma makes very little or no difference. However, in this case the use of a comma completely changes the meaning. Without the comma after the word "used" in verse 13, the revelation recommends the use of meat year round. The placement of a comma prohibits the use of meat altogether, except "in times of winter, or of cold, or famine."⁵

McConkie goes on to suggest that not only is the comma a mistake but that it "could very well be removed" in a future edition of the book.

Notwithstanding the popularity of this explanation and the absence of an official interpretation of verse 13, I believe that this particular reading of the text is without merit. Below I will summarize the reasons why, of all possible explanations of this verse, this one is not a worthy contender.

Use of D&C 89:13 Before and After 1921

The theory that the added comma is problematic rests on the assumption that adding the comma *changes* the meaning of the text. Those who support this theory assert that the original and true meaning of the verse is clear once the comma is removed: the Lord is *not* pleased when we use the flesh of beasts and

5 James W. McConkie II, *Looking at the Doctrine and Covenants Again for the Very First Time* (West Valley City, UT: Temple Hill Books, 2010), 353.

fowls of the air (meat) only in times of winter, or of cold, or of famine. The implication is that it pleases him if we use meat at other times as well.

While it is true that the comma did not appear in this verse until 1921, it is equally clear that the way the text was read without the comma in the decades before 1921 was identical to the way the text is read today with the addition of the comma. In other words, adding the comma did not change the way the text was read. In fact, Latter-day Saints who were adult members of the Church in 1921 did not remark on any change of meaning with the addition of the comma. The assertion that the text should be read differently without the comma is a much later idea, dating back to about the 1960s.⁶

The following are examples of the way D&C 89:13 was read before 1921:

a. In **1842**, **Hyrum Smith** was Patriarch to the Church at the time he gave a lengthy sermon on the Word of Wisdom. He states:

Let men attend to these instructions, let them use the things ordained of God; let them be sparing of the life of animals; “it is pleasing saith the Lord that flesh be used only in times of winter, or of famine” — and why to be used in famine? because all domesticated animals would naturally die, and may as well be made use of by man, as not.⁷

⁶ The first reference I have seen in print is in the first edition of Richard O. Cowan’s *Doctrine & Covenants: Our Modern Scriptures* (Provo: Brigham Young University Division of Continuing Education, 1966). Dr. Cowan does not recall where this idea came from (e-mail message to the author, January 30, 2013).

⁷ Hyrum Smith, “The Word of Wisdom,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 15 (June 1, 1842): 801.

b. In **John Jacques's** popular **1854** *Catechism for Children*, Mormon youth are asked, “Why should flesh be eaten by man in winter, and in times of famine, and not at other times?” They are instructed:

Flesh is heating to the human system, therefore it is not good to eat flesh in summer; but God allows his people to eat it in winter, and in times of famine, because all animals suffer death naturally, if they do not by the hand of man.⁸

c. In **1857**, **Apostle Heber C. Kimball** said:

In a revelation which God gave to Joseph Smith, he says, “It is not pleasing in my sight for man to shed blood of beasts, or of fowls, except in times of excess of hunger and famine.” Go and read it for yourselves.⁹

d. In **1868**, **President Brigham Young** counseled:

Flesh should be used sparingly, in famine and in cold.¹⁰

e. In **1868**, **Apostle George Q. Cannon** said:

We are told that flesh of any kind is not suitable to man in the summer time, and ought to be eaten sparingly in the winter.¹¹

8 John Jacques, *Catechism for Children Exhibiting the Prominent Doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1854), 63.

9 Heber C. Kimball, “Shedding Blood—God’s Provision for His Saints,” in *Journal of Discourses*, 6:50, November 15, 1857.

10 Brigham Young, “The True Church of Christ—the Living Testimony—Word of Wisdom,” in *Journal of Discourses*, 12:209, May 10, 1868.

11 George Q. Cannon, “Word of Wisdom—Fish Culture—Dietetic,” in *Journal of Discourses*, 12:221–22, April 7, 1868.

f. In **1895, Apostle Lorenzo Snow** (then President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles) stated:

Unless famine or extreme cold is upon us we should refrain from the use of meat.¹²

There is no evidence for the idea that, before 1921, any of the literate, well-read Church leaders or Church members read D&C 89:13 in the way later supporters of the “errant comma theory” suggest the text should have been read without the comma.

Further, after the comma was inserted in 1921, no one noticed that the addition of the comma made their previous reading of the text problematic. Church members continued to interpret verse 13 the way they had before, including those who were old enough to have noticed the change. No one spoke of the meaning of the text having been “changed” by the added comma. Here are a few examples after 1921:

a. **Apostle John A. Widtsoe and Leah D. Widtsoe** wrote *The Word of Wisdom, a Modern Interpretation*. Elder Widtsoe, born in 1872, became an apostle in 1921, the same year the comma was added. In the original 1937 edition of this book and also in the revised 1950 edition, they wrote:

The Word of Wisdom ... deals only with grains, fruits, vegetables—nature’s products—and with meat to be used sparingly in cold or famine.¹³

b. **Apostle Joseph F. Merrill**, born in 1868, would have been fifty-three years old when the comma was added. In a general conference address on the Word of

12 Dennis B. Horne, ed., *An Apostle’s Record: The Journals of Abraham H. Cannon* (Clearfield, UT: Gnolaum Books, 2004), 424.

13 John A. Widtsoe and Leah D. Widtsoe, *The Word of Wisdom: A Modern Interpretation* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1937), 178–79.

Wisdom, he emphasized the importance of not eating meat as “freely as many Americans are doing” and stated:

[Quoting from a book] “Under conditions of extreme exposure to cold the heat [from consuming excess protein in meat] might be of service. On the other hand, in case of fever, and in hot weather, the heat excess induced by too much protein may do great harm.”

Now I read again the words of the revelation to the Prophet:

“... they [meats] are to be used sparingly; And it is pleasing unto me that they should not be used, only in times of winter, or of cold, or famine (D&C 89:12–13).”¹⁴

c. **President George Albert Smith**, born in 1870, was fifty-one years old in 1921. President Smith was apparently careful about his consumption of meat. In the 1950 *Improvement Era* devoted to honoring his 80th birthday, his son-in-law reported:

President Smith’s meals are simple and nourishing. In the summer he eats no meat, and even in the winter months he eats very little.¹⁵

Why Was the Comma Added?

If the inserted comma did not change the way the text was read, why was it added? While there is no definitive evidence of

14 Joseph F. Merrill, “Eat Flesh Sparingly,” in Conference Report, April 1948, 75. This reads “[meats]” in the original article.

15 Robert Murray Stewart, “A Normal Day in the Home of George Albert Smith,” *Improvement Era* 53 (April, 1950): 287.

who inserted the comma and for what purpose, there are only two ways the comma could have got into that verse: either it was added intentionally or by mistake.

If it was added intentionally, Apostle James E. Talmage is the person most likely to have inserted this comma, and he is the person most often cited as being responsible for it. Because of his attention to detail, the editing of scriptural text was often entrusted to him. The manuscript containing the revisions for the 1920 Book of Mormon are all in his hand; of the hundreds of punctuation changes made to the 1920 Book of Mormon edition, all of them came from Talmage, and none was due to a typesetting error.¹⁶ As Talmage was also on the same committee when they revised the D&C in 1921, it is likely he directed the punctuation changes in that edition as well, including inserting the comma into 89:13. Whether or not it was Apostle Talmage, if the comma was added intentionally, it was undoubtedly done by (or under the direction of) one or more of the original committee members assigned to the task, though apparently without the knowledge of Joseph Fielding Smith (if we assume Woodford's telling of the story is correct).

If we take Woodford's story at face value, Elder Smith had not seen the comma before it was shown to him, but this is not evidence that the comma was put in by the printer or even evidence it was put in by mistake. It is not even evidence that Elder Smith believed the comma changed the meaning of the text, especially given that he himself wrote the following in his 1947 commentary on the Word of Wisdom:

Neither is it the intent of this revelation to include grains and fruits in the restriction placed upon meats,

¹⁶ Royal Skousen, e-mail message to the author, February 2, 2013.

that they should be used only in famine or excess of hunger.¹⁷

Without definitive records explaining the change, what can we know about why it may have been added? Modern linguists can provide a significant clue. LDS linguistics scholar Royal Skousen explains how the natural evolution of language can cause problems for our understanding and interpretation of certain verses:

A number of passages from the scriptures ... have caused misunderstanding and confusion. In each of these passages the source of the difficulty has been the language of the passage itself. Sometimes archaic words or changes in word meaning cause misunderstanding.... Much of our confusion over these passages can be resolved when we seek to determine what the words in the scriptures originally meant.¹⁸

One of the examples Skousen uses is the word *only* in D&C 89:13. He explains how the meaning of the word *only* changed over time, making it useful for the comma to be added so that modern readers would not misunderstand the verse. Skousen writes:

Now let us turn to a couple of examples from the Doctrine and Covenants. First, consider the use of the word *only* in that part of the Word of Wisdom that deals with eating meat: “Yea, flesh also of beasts and of the fowls of the air, I, the Lord, have ordained for the use of man with thanksgiving; nevertheless they are to be used sparingly; and it is pleasing unto me

17 Joseph Fielding Smith, *Church History and Modern Revelation*, vol. 2 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1947), 148.

18 Royal Skousen, “Through a Glass Darkly: Trying to Understand the Scriptures,” *BYU Studies* 26, no. 4 (1986): 1.

that they should not be used, only in times of winter, or of cold, or famine” (D&C 89:12–13, 1921 and 1981 editions). In editions prior to 1921, the comma before *only* was missing: “And it is pleasing unto me that they should not be used only in times of winter, or of cold, or famine” (1879 edition). A reader might interpret this as meaning that meat could be used at any time, not only in times of winter, cold, or famine.

Of course, the real problem here is in the meaning of *only*. In the last century the word *only* very often had the meaning “except.” For example, the Oxford English Dictionary quotes a use of *only* that undoubtedly means “except”: “For many years the following notice was painted up at Bolton railway station: “Do not cross the line only by the bridge.” Clearly, this is the appropriate sense of *only* in this verse from section 89. James E. Talmage put the comma in the 1921 edition, but not in order to change the meaning of *only*. Instead, the meaning of *only* had changed and the comma was put in so that the modern reader could read the verse and still get out its original meaning.¹⁹

In fact, there are many other examples throughout the scriptures where the word *only* means “except.” According to Skousen:

There are at least 10 clear instances of “only” with the meaning “except” in the Book of Mormon text.... The 1830 typesetter put a comma before 7 of the 10.... But for three instances he missed the need to put the comma.²⁰

19 Skousen, “Through a Glass Darkly,” 5.

20 Royal Skousen, e-mail message to the author, February 2, 2013.

The following are two examples from D&C 121 where the word *only* clearly means “except.” Note that the first example does not include a clarifying comma:

That the rights of the priesthood are inseparably connected with the powers of heaven, and that the powers of heaven cannot be controlled nor handled only upon the principles of righteousness. (D&C 121:36)

No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned. (D&C 121:41)

Because there is no comma before the word *only* in verse 36, could we interpret it to mean that the powers of heaven *can* be controlled and handled on principles *other* than righteousness? Do we need some principles of *unrighteousness* to assist the priesthood? Clearly this does not make good sense, so we simply understand the word *only* to mean “except.”

In the second example, a comma comes before the word *only*, but even if we discovered that this comma was absent from this verse before 1921, no one would assert that the *original* meaning of this scripture was that such principles as persuasion, long-suffering, and love unfeigned are somehow insufficient to maintain the power of the priesthood. We would not be arguing that the addition of the comma *reversed* the meaning of the text. We’d simply interpret the word *only* to mean “except.”

Greater Internal Consistency

Looking at verse 13 from a different angle, another reason cited for discounting the “errant comma theory” is that the addition

of the comma creates greater internal consistency in D&C 89. As Stephen Robinson and Dean Garrett note:

The difficulty in verse 13 lies in the comma following the word “used.” Depending upon the presence or absence of this comma, contradictory meanings may be ascribed to the text. Between 1833 and 1921, there was no comma in the text at this point in the revelation. The comma was first inserted in the revelation in the 1921 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants.

However, insertion of the comma brings verse 13 into agreement with the clear sense and intent of verses 12 and 15, and without it, these would seem to contradict verse 13.²¹

This explanation is especially interesting in light of the fact that internal consistency is the most-cited reason for asserting that the comma is a mistake. This following example from McConkie’s D&C commentary is an example of this reasoning:

The placement of the comma in section 89 is inconsistent with some of the other revelations Joseph received. For example, in section 49 the Lord explicitly states that a person who “forbiddeth to abstain from meats ... is not ... of God.” (D&C 49:18.) Furthermore, meat is “ordained for the use of man for food and for raiment, and that he might have in abundance.” (D&C 49:19.) Timothy in the New Testament also warns that in the last days some, not of God, will forbid eating meat, “which God hath created to be received with

21 Stephen Robinson and Dean Garrett, *A Commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants*, vol.3 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 149.

thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth.” (1 Timothy 4:3.)²²

The assertion that the meaning of verse 13 with the added comma is in conflict with other scriptures is a matter of interpretation. The meaning of D&C 89 with the inserted comma does not “forbid” the use of meat. Rather, it seems to say that meat is ordained for the use of man, but it is to be used sparingly, only in times of winter, cold, or famine.

No Changes to D&C 89:13 after 1921

Just as significantly, the punctuation in verse 13 has not been altered since 1921, not even during the major revision of the D&C done in 1981 when many changes were made and the footnotes were completely updated. Apparently, this was not an oversight, as verse 13 was specifically reviewed by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve, who, after asking Elder Bruce R. McConkie to research the matter, “decided that the comma as it now stands was in the proper place and should not be removed.” Here is the complete account as it appears in a biography of Bruce R. McConkie:

The Brethren carefully examined the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants for printing errors and mistakes, including details as small as the placement of a comma. For example, during the committee’s work on the Doctrine and Covenants, the subject of the comma in section 89, verse 13, came up for discussion. The presence, or lack thereof, of the comma between the words “used” and “only” can drastically change the meaning of the verse. Earlier publications of the Church which contained this verse were ambiguous, as some included the comma and others did not. Elder

22 McConkie, *Looking at the Doctrine and Covenants*, 353.

McConkie said that the subject had been discussed by the First Presidency and the Twelve a year or two earlier. At that time they asked Elder McConkie to research the subject, which he did. His findings were then approved, and it was decided that the comma as it now stands was in the proper place and should not be removed. Therefore, the Scriptures Publications Committee did not take any further action. Elders Monson and Packer, both of whom were at this meeting, concurred with the decision to leave it as is.²³

Finally, it seems wise to base our interpretation of verse 13 on the current edition of the scriptures, especially in light of the fact that there is no evidence to suggest the alternative “errant comma” interpretation warrants merit. As Robinson and Garrett note in their 2004 D&C commentary:

[S]ince 1921, several different First Presidencies have had the opportunity to correct the reading of verse 13 in subsequent editions of the Doctrine and Covenants and have specifically declined to do so. At present, given our firm conviction in continuing revelation, we need to follow the reading of the most recent edition. There is no commandment or constraint on this issue, and Church leaders seem content to let the Saints apply the principle as stated here individually as guided by the Spirit.²⁴

Robert Woodford, who in 1974 had suggested the comma was a printing error, conceded in 1979 that we should “accept the verse [D&C 89:13] as written.” He still held to the view that the comma “reverses the meaning of the verse” but noted: “[I]n

23 Dennis B. Horne (2000). *Bruce R. McConkie: Highlights from His Life and Teachings* (Roy, UT: Eborn Books, 2000), 190.

24 Robinson and Garrett, *Commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants*, vol. 3, 149.

actuality most Latter-day Saints' lifestyle is lived as though the comma were not there."²⁵

Historical Interpretations of D&C 89:13

If the “errant comma theory” is not plausible, what does D&C 89:13 mean? To date, there is no consensus of opinion. In fact, during the last eight decades the number of interpretations has multiplied. This is in contrast to the first 100 years after 1833 when there actually was a consensus on the meaning of this verse among Latter-day Saints who addressed the issue. It was a literalist interpretation that took the verse at face value: it is pleasing to God if we do not use the flesh of beasts or fowls of the air, except in times of winter, cold, or famine.²⁶

The standard interpretation of D&C 89:13 during the first 100 years did not have a widespread impact on the dietary practices of the Saints during this time, but this is not because the Saints found this verse too ambiguous. The fact is, many Saints had a difficult time abiding by even the clearest counsel found the Word of Wisdom.²⁷ After the revelation was given in 1833, there were Saints who promoted abstinence from alcohol, tobacco, coffee, and tea as the official standard for keeping the Word of Wisdom.²⁸ But the clarity of a standard of abstinence is quantitatively easier to understand and assess as compared to admonitions to use wholesome plants with “prudence and thanksgiving,” make grain the “staff of life,”

25 Robert J. Woodford, “A Survey of Textual Changes in the Doctrine and Covenants,” in *Seventh Annual Sydney B. Sperry Symposium: The Doctrine and Covenants* (Provo, Utah, Brigham Young University Religious Instruction, January 27, 1979), 33. [unpublished manuscript]

26 This is based on my own analysis of the Word of Wisdom literature (published books, articles, and, more recently, websites) from 1833 to the present day.

27 Paul H. Peterson, “An Historical Analysis of the Word of Wisdom” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1972).

28 Paul Y. Hoskisson, “The Word of Wisdom in Its First Decade,” *Journal of Mormon History* 38, no. 1 (winter 2012): 132.

or eat meat “sparingly” and “only in times of winter, or of cold, or famine.” Even so, the process of lifting the general Church membership to even the basic standard of abstinence from alcohol, tobacco, coffee, and tea took almost 100 years, and even now (181 years later) the task is not complete. LDS Church leaders are still working to help the Saints become fully obedient to this basic standard, even though the counsel in section 89 was specifically “adapted to the capacity of the weak and the weakest of all saints” (D&C 89:3).

Because Church leaders have never made verses 12–17 of section 89 part of the standard for Church worthiness, discussion of these verses has not played as prominent a role in the Word of Wisdom literature. This is particularly true of verse 13. In fact, Latter-day Saints who have addressed the Word of Wisdom during the last few decades have been more likely to emphasize the fact that meat is “ordained of God” and “not forbidden” than to suggest that Latter-day Saints should curtail their consumption, much less forego it other than in times of winter, cold, or famine.

It may be because of a disconnect between a straightforward reading of verse 13 and the dietary practices of the LDS people that alternative interpretations of verse 13 have flourished. Like the “errant comma theory,” most of the explanations of verse 13 (both before and after 1921) have been asserted without much evidence and have subsequently never been carefully analyzed for veracity.²⁹

While it is clear that the meaning of D&C 89:13 is not critical to keeping the Word of Wisdom in terms of the worthiness standard of the Church, it may be of value to anyone who wants to better understand the Word of Wisdom, as well to those who hope to claim the full measure of the promises

²⁹ This is based on the author’s analysis of the Word of Wisdom literature from 1833 to the present. The author is also doing research to explore the multiple ways D&C 89:13 has been interpreted since 1833.

contained therein for those who “remember to keep and do these sayings” (D&C 89:18).

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